

Are students demanding a limit to free speech on campuses today?

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Tara García Mathewson

Some say marginalized students are finally finding their voice but others see a threat

By [Tara García Mathewson](#) | March 4, 2016

More of this year's freshman class expects to participate in at least one protest while they're in college [than at any other time in the last 50 years](#). The portion of all students who claim to be these prospective protesters? 10%. Among black students, the proportion rises to 16%.

While some argue the rise in college protests can be attributed to the fact that marginalized students are finding their voices and demanding better, others see a threat to free speech in these campaigns. Two researchers argued for *The Atlantic* last fall that today's college climate represents [a coddling of the American mind](#).

At Yale this week, Intelligence Squared convened a debate about whether free speech is threatened on campus, ending the night with two-thirds of audience members siding with the "yes" camp.

"There's been a change in atmosphere on college campuses that does threaten — not extinguish, threaten — free speech over the past 10 years," said John McWhorter, professor of linguistics at Columbia University.

His debate partner, Wendy Kaminer, is a writer, lawyer, and civil libertarian. Throughout the debate, Kaminer highlighted a number of cases on college campuses throughout the country where people faced backlash and, in some cases, lost their jobs, because of statements that met with strong opposition.

At the University of South Carolina, she said, students were investigated for rallying against campus censorship because some of their peers felt discriminated against. A professor at Brandeis, she said, was investigated for racial harassment after explaining "wetback" was pejorative, and using the term in a course discussion. A debate about rape culture at Brown University was protested as violating the safety of survivors of sexual assault.

On the other side of the debate were Shaun Harper, a professor in the Graduate School of Education and executive director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania and Jason Stanley, a philosophy professor at Yale.

Harper cited research on the other side of the equation, about students who have been stigmatized and discriminated against, quietly, for years. He argued the act of speaking out — naming someone's racism, for example — invites a conversation, rather than shutting one down.

"The act of protesting is not the denial of free speech," Stanley said. "It is the exercise of free speech."

Stanley sees more speech on campuses today and counts that as a victory for marginalized groups that were long silenced.

But if their complaints over microaggressions and triggers end up silencing debate, McWhorter does not see progress.

“I’m afraid that what we’re seeing on one campus after another is an idea that shaming people and shutting them down via the ample use of buzzwords and slogans and sonorous cadence is somehow okay when it comes to espousing a leftist agenda,” McWhorter said.

In the aftermath of this fall’s upheaval, colleges and universities across the country will have to strike a balance between making students feel safe and supported, and allowing room for discourse. Colleges have long provided a space for students to test out new ideas, develop their worldviews, and practice critical thinking skills in the course of scholarly debate. Underrepresented minorities make up a larger portion of many college campuses than ever before, adding their lived experiences and perspectives to a range of discussions they have historically been locked out of.

Creating an environment that fosters respectful, scholarly discourse is a key challenge for higher education institutions today — something that should not be forgotten in the related push to increase diversity and improve student outcomes across the board.

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